

Non-Literary Items in Literary Texts: Why contemporary authors are changing the standard form of literature

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Most people have a pretty clear idea of what a book looks like. If you asked people at random to describe the physical characteristics of a book, you might receive a similar description: words typed in black ink on rectangular white paper in straight lines which are bound together to form the book. While this definition would accurately describe most books since the time of the printing press, several novels in contemporary fiction have defied this standard structure of a book. The methods are plentiful – some books have pictures interwoven within the text, some books print the text but in a sort of visual format other than straight lines, and some books stray away from the traditional printing of words or the traditional sturdiness of the page. While the fact that this shift is occurring is alone interesting, the real question is, why? For centuries, people have been able to convey their thoughts and feelings in the standard book format, so why do certain contemporary authors choose to publish their books in an untraditional format? For some, the choice goes beyond the physical, visual appeal of the book and relates to the content and purpose of the story within.

This paper will analyze several novels that include visual or non-standard elements in literature, including *Nadja* by André Breton, *Tree of Codes* by Jonathan Safran Foer and *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* by Ben Fountain. In all of these novels, the basis of the plotline is not a classic theme such as romance, heroism, or friendship; rather, the main focuses are new to our world, including political theory and modern warfare. My analysis will show that these modern topics and characters in novels are nearly impossible to convey with simply words on a page. The only way to truly capture these abstract concepts is with something more than the page and printed words, because the standard book limits the depth and realms that the novel can inhabit, while images and unusual structure allow

the author to transcend time and space to make their stories more full. In the past, imagery as a literary technique, or describing images with words, was enough. However with these new, often unimaginable situations to describe, the physical presence of images is often the only way to wholly convey the author's vision and message to the intended audience.

In 1914, a war like none preceding it in history began. World War I forever changed the way the world approaches warfare, because of the new modern techniques that were used in battle. New military strategies included trench warfare and naval offenses, which led to unprecedented casualties and losses in battle. In addition, because of growing technology and globalization, this war affected nearly every country in the western world.¹ Not surprisingly, because everything about World War I was so new and different from wars of the past, people reacted in a different way. In addition to anticipated wartime emotions such as patriotism, pride and grief, people also had more complicated, long-term reactions. Specifically, ideology of the war became present in philosophy and art because logical justifications and visual displays were methods that people used to synthesize the complexity of the war.

One result of World War I was Dadaism, a movement of artists and poets that began in Germany. The art movement focused on anti-war politics, as it opposed reason and instead favored irrationality. Through art, Dada set the foundation for the idea of the abstract, and used new artistic methods to respond to the unspeakable horrors of the war.² Today, Dadaism is remembered as a small movement in history, but it is extremely

¹ "The Nature of World War I." *The Nature of World War I*. SUNY Suffolk, n.d. Web. 12 Dec. 2013. <<http://www2.sunysuffolk.edu/westn/natureww1.html>>.

² "Dada (art Movement)." *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*. Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d. Web. 11 Dec. 2013. <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/149499/Dada>>.

significant because the Dada ideology set the foundation for the Surrealist movement, and serves as the link between World War I and surrealism.

Surrealism began to take form in the 1920s as another abstract movement in art and literature. Stemming from the confusion about the world we live in as triggered by the events of World War I, Surrealism is founded in philosophy and questions the idea of multiple realms of existence. People generally accept that there is a reality, dreams, and maybe other realms as well. However, surrealism conflates these into one world, and surrealist artists express this possibility both visually as well as through writing. Like Dadaism, surrealism is deeply philosophical but much more positive in its forms of expression.³

André Breton was the leader of the surrealist movement. Breton was not only in a position to establish surrealist thought, but also took the role of writing two surrealist manifestos and several other writings on the subject. In addition to political writings, he also expressed his ideas through fiction. In his novella *Nadja*, Breton combines both art and literature into a compelling story that embodies many surrealist ideas because there are no lines or boundaries to distinguish between what is reality and what is imagination. Published in 1928, the book is about a narrator who recounts his experience with Nadja, a girl he meets on the street and who disappears before the novel ends.

Through the character of Nadja, Breton is able to explain the complex ideas of surrealism through the accessible, traditional form of the novel. The first-person narration of the story allows the reader to quickly understand that the narrator is attracted to Nadja and completely enveloped with her thoughts and ideas because of her unusual views of the

³ "Surrealism (art and Literature)." *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*. Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d. Web. 18 Dec. 2013. <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/575336/Surrealism>>.

world. The first time the narrator and Nadja meet, their conversation is unlike the usual first interactions between two people – they both notice each other and immediately fall into a personal and philosophical conversation. For example, Nadja first talks about her parents and says of her father, “I love him so much. Each time I think of him, I tell myself how weak he is.”⁴ Not only is this about a personal relation to her parents, it’s an unusual thought to connect weakness to love, which the narrator seems to find intriguing. The views of Nadja and the narrator are meant to represent surrealist beliefs, and as the two characters validate each other’s claims, it is a way of Breton expressing the fascination of these views. Towards the end of their first interaction, the narrator asks, “‘Who are you?’ And she, without a moment’s hesitation: ‘I am the soul in limbo.’”⁵ Being in “limbo” represents existing somewhere between different realms, which renders Nadja as a person living in a perpetual surrealist state. In addition, the narrator says that Nadja, “tell[s] me what it is about me that touches her. It is – in the way I think, speak, in my whole manner, apparently: and this is one of the compliments which has moved me most of my whole life – my *simplicity*.”⁶ By saying that simplicity is the greatest compliment to a surrealist, Breton again emphasizes through the relationship of his characters the beauty of surrealist ideas, because the conflation of existence is a positive way to simplify the world.

The character of Nadja is also used as a way to personify the surrealist connection between reality and dream. During the novel, the reader is likely to question whether Nadja exists, and at the end will not have a concrete answer. This is precisely Breton’s point. He believes that reality and imagination is a single realm, and there should not be lines drawn

⁴ Breton, André. *Nadja*. New York: Grove, 1994. Print. 67.

⁵ Breton, *Nadja*. 71.

⁶ Breton, *Nadja*. 71.

between them. Breton aims to prove this theory in the way that Nadja affects the protagonist. Whether or not the reader chooses to accept Nadja's existence, it is undeniable that the idea or presence of Nadja changes the narrator's mental state. This is just the same as how the dreams of most people affect their reality. Because Breton thinks that dreams are merely a subset of reality, both are in the same realm. Likewise, there is no need to draw a conclusion about Nadja's existence because at the very least, the idea of her exists, and everything exists in one realm, so the idea of her is present and affecting reality even if she is not tangibly present.⁷ Breton further portrays this idea by allowing the reader to compare the difference between the narrator's mental state while Nadja is "present" with his mental state after the narrator has distanced himself from Nadja. She exists in the present, and exists in his memory, but seems to have even more of an affect on the narrator in his memory of her. If the certain nonexistence of Nadja is more influential on the narrator than her apparent existence in the novel, then we can see that the impact of our imaginations and thoughts are a part of reality.

One peculiar aspect of Breton's work is the way in which he connects surrealist literature to art. As mentioned, Breton would say that whether or not Nadja exists does not matter because of the influence she has on the narrator; however, the reader will no doubt question Nadja's existence, and Breton helps to facilitate an answer through the use of images. A reader has four interpretation options when reading Nadja: a) he can say that it does not matter what is real versus imagined; b) he can say everything in the story happened in actuality and Nadja is a real, tangible person; c) he can say that the story

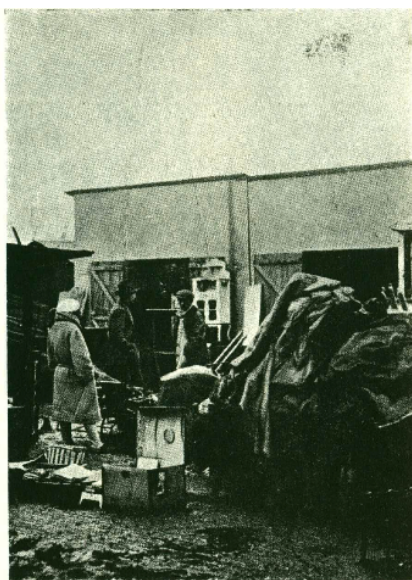
⁷ Mascioli, Chris. "Nadja." *Slideshare*. N.p., 22 Mar. 2010. Web. 12 Dec. 2013. <<http://www.slideshare.net/chris Mascioli/nadja-11321648>>.

happened but that the character of Nadja does not exist; or d) the reader can say that the entire story is a dream. There is evidence for all of these possibilities – I have already discussed the justification for the first. The second option would require the reader to take the words at face value and accept everything Breton writes, which is illogical given the knowledge that Breton is part of the surrealism movement. However, c) and d) are both plausible.

To consider Breton's intention, it is extremely significant that along with the standard, written word, Breton includes 44 images that illustrate the text. The reader must ask what the purpose is of including these images in order to understand the surrealist messages at the core of the novel. For most of the book, at least before page 116, the images appear to be for reference. For example, Breton writes about his correspondence with Paul Eluard, and so he includes a portrait of Eluard so the reader has some reference of whom Breton is talking about (Image 1). When the narrator goes to a flea market, he includes an image of the flea market for visual representation (Image 2).



(Image 1, Breton 27)



(Image 2, Breton 52)

While the large majority of the novel includes basic images such as these, there is a shift in the type of images and their purpose in the last quarter of the book. Beginning on page 116, the images are not of people and places but are reproductions of Nadja's artwork.

Let us explore the possibility that the entire novel is designed as a dream. Although *Nadja* has an overall plotline, the story itself is quite vague, as it asks many open-ended philosophical questions (including beginning with the line, "Who am I?"). Throughout the novel the narrator jumps from one recollection to another, and even the person speaking is usually unclear. Dialogue is written without punctuation, and paragraphs extend for pages. This written structure mirrors that of a dream – everything is jumbled and ambiguous, but certain moments and images stand out with a profound meaning or impact.⁸ If the entire story is a dream, Nadja and the narrator and all of their surroundings alike, it builds on the established idea that dreams and reality are really indistinguishable because of the impact they have on mental states. Breton upholds that something can be mysterious and unclear, but nonetheless intriguing. While there are many jumbled thoughts in the words of Breton's novel, there are distinct images that stand out for one reason or another among the blur. Some seem to have meaning such as the paintings by Nadja, while others seem rather arbitrary. This combination of words and images imitates the experience of remembering a dream. Concluding that all of the events of *Nadja* are simply a dream reemphasizes the interconnectedness between dream and reality, because the difficulty to distinguish between them shows their influence on one another in a single realm.

Drawing this conclusion from a reading of *Nadja* would also illuminate the surrealist interest in Freud. In *Interpretation of Dreams*, Sigmund Freud writes that all dreams can be

⁸ "Reading Surrealism: A View of Nadja." (*Visual*) *Notes on Culture*. N.p., 17 July 2006. Web. 12 Dec. 2013. <<http://notesonculture.blogspot.com/2006/07/reading-surrealism-view-of-nadja.html>>.

scientifically interpreted, either through a system of analogy or a system of coding. It seems that surrealists such as Breton would want to accept Freud's ideas, because Freud believes that dreams are inextricably linked to reality and should be scientifically interpreted as a significant part of the human psyche. Freud points out that the analogy type of dream is common in literature, and if *Nadja* can indeed be read as a dream, then it is intended to be analogous to a way of living from the view of surrealism. Given that Breton would likely agree with Freud's ideas about dreams, this supports that Breton might have written the entire novel to be read as a dream because readers could analyze the book in a way that could be applied to their own lives and further understand the connection between dream and reality.⁹

However, it is also possible to read the novel and conclude that Nadja does not really exist while the rest of the story does. Although it initially seems like Breton would reject this interpretation because it draws lines between different realms, the inclusion of images in the text could be interpreted in a way that overrides and complicates his position. Because the places and people he discusses and illustrates in the first part of the book are tangible, these images can be considered a method for grounding the text in reality. These images stand in stark contrast to the images of Nadja's own artwork in the later part of the novel, and an analysis of Nadja's art supports the idea that Nadja is intended to not exist while the rest of the novel does.

It might seem obvious to say that because there is tangible proof of Nadja's art, she must exist to have created it. However, it is significant that of all the people the narrator encounters in the story, he never includes a photograph of Nadja, only people, objects and

⁹ Freud, Sigmund, and James Strachey. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. New York: Science Editions, 1961. Print.

places relating to her. For example, at one point he shows a picture of a fountain, and writes that, “We are in front of a fountain, whose jet she seems to be watching.”¹⁰ Breton could have easily included a photo of Nadja looking at the fountain, but instead he chooses to only share with the audience what she sees, which reemphasizes that the effect her character has on other people and experiences is more important than her actual presence.

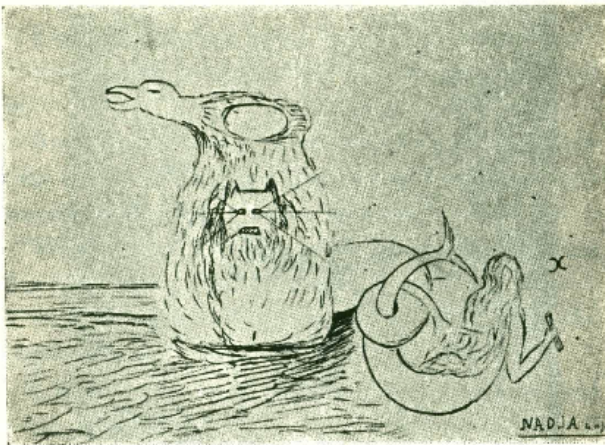
While the narrator fails to fully describe Nadja’s physical presence, Nadja is also quite mysterious in her own artwork because she never depicts her own face. In plate 30, Nadja draws “A symbolic portrait of the two of us” (Image 3). Here, the reader is told that the drawing is supposed to be symbolic, and what we see is a “monster with gleaming eyes,” and a siren facing away.¹¹ Since the stated symbolism gives the direction to interpret the drawing, the reader might understand the image as the narrator searching for answers about the world around him, while he is trying to grab hold of Nadja who is faceless, implying nonexistence. Another fascinating drawing by Nadja is of a woman in a long cloak with her hair standing up, staring straight forward, with a huge question mark framing her face (Image 4). Next to the woman is the question, “Qu’est elle?” which is French for, “Who is she?” In this drawing where the woman’s face is identifiable, her contextualized identity is left unknown. In addition, this piece of art mirrors the opening line of the book, “Who am I?” and the narrator’s first question to Nadja, “Who are you?”¹² Nadja’s art reminds us of the big questions asked by surrealist figures, and brings the novel full circle by connecting the visual aspects of *Nadja* to the questions in writing. The content of Nadja’s artwork as well as the contrast between what she draws and the other images in the book support the

¹⁰ Breton, *Nadja*. 87.

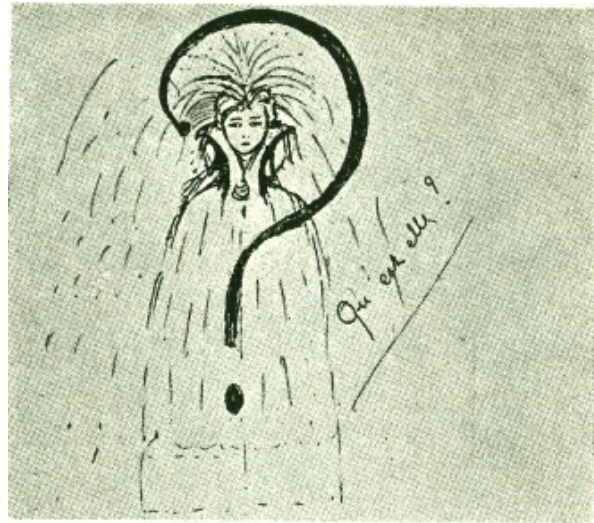
¹¹ Breton, *Nadja*. 121.

¹² Breton, *Nadja*. 11, 71.

conclusion that Breton intended for Nadja to be nonexistent while the rest of the events in the book happened. Still, this is difficult to reconcile with the surrealist idea of conflating realms. Perhaps simply the controversy over the existence of Nadja is intended to show that lines between different worlds – that of reality and the imagined – are impossible to draw definitively.



(Image 3, Breton 118)



(Image 4, Breton 123)

Not only were Breton's surrealist ideas new to literature and art, but his choice to include visual imagery along with his text adds a unique element to contemporary fiction. Because of the modern warfare in World War I and the political theory that erupted as a response to the war, it is not surprising that writing to express these ideas required a new format of literature. André Breton as a leader of the surrealist movement drew inspiration from the Dada art movement, so it was intrinsic for Breton's writing to take on an art form of its own, and for him to include visual art along with his printed text. Modern philosophical and political ideas are unlike those of the past because of the new conflicts they represent in this era. The surrealist vision of a streamlined and conflated reality is so

conceptual that words alone make it difficult to represent on paper. While the character of Nadja personifies these ideas to increase understanding for Breton's readers, it is the inclusion of the visual images that makes the difference in impact between regular novels and what Breton accomplishes in his work. The 44 images in *Nadja* are a necessary component to fully capture the complexity of surrealism and explain the concept as a direct reaction to the events of modern warfare.

Only two decades after World War I opened the military possibilities of the world into a new era of global involvement in conflict, World War II began and the atrocities worsened. For the first and only time in history, nuclear weapons were used, which means that millions of civilians as well as soldiers were killed as a result of the Second World War, while hundreds of thousands more suffered life-long injuries and health defects as an outcome of the attacks. By most historical records, the war lasted for six years until 1945, and had one of the highest death tolls in history.¹³

A significant component of World War II that was both militaristic and political was the Holocaust. Adolf Hitler was the leader of the Nazi party founded in Germany. Although at first he only won minority votes in national elections, he worked through different positions until the Nazi party gained political power. Hitler imagined a world where Germans are racially superior to all others, and to create this superior Germany he led the Nazis in persecuting everyone who was different. This included gypsies, communists and

¹³ "World War II (1939-45)." *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*. Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d. Web. 18 Dec. 2013. <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/648813/World-War-II>>.

homosexuals among others, but the main target group was the Jewish people.¹⁴

Throughout the war, Jews were taken from their homes and communities and sent to concentration camps, where they were not treated as humans. Upon arriving at the camps, all people had their hair shaved, were given a tattoo with an identification number, and changed into a uniform. The homogeneity of the Jews once in the concentration camps shows that they were treated as commodities rather than sentient human beings. Beyond the loss of identity, people sent to concentration camps endured physical labor, starvation, and constant threats to life.

Historically there have been numerous genocides in different countries, but the Holocaust was unique in the terrifyingly brilliant way it was carried out. Because dozens of nations were already at war, Hitler's actions were seen as part of the German war effort when they began, and less attention was given to the effects on civilians. Hitler gained a great deal of power very quickly, especially while the Germans were ahead in the war, to the point that the only way to stop the Holocaust would be to end the entire war with Germany's defeat. Although this finally occurred in 1945, it was too late - 11 million total people had already perished in the Holocaust.¹⁵

As a result of these horrible historical events, dozens of books have been written on this subject. They range from young adult novels that try to explain the topic to adolescent readers to adult literature that portrays the subject from a plethora of viewpoints. However, capturing the complicated events of World War II while trying to make sense of the loss of millions of innocent civilians is unimaginably difficult with words on a page. This

¹⁴, ¹⁵ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. "The Holocaust." Holocaust Encyclopedia. Web. 12 Dec. 2013. <<http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005143>>.

task is especially difficult because some writers do not just want to commemorate the people who were lost, but all of their contributions to the world that were also lost when they were taken from their homes and separated from their life possessions. For example, *The Diary of Anne Frank* is widely read because it is a journal found in the remains from a family of Jews who went into hiding before being captured by the Nazis. Certainly its popularity comes from the fact that it was a young girl writing who had very interesting insights on the war and her situation. However, its popularity is also attributable to the fact that quality writing and art created by people who perished in the Holocaust were rarely found after the war ended.

For this reason exactly, Jonathan Safran Foer tries to capture and commemorate some of the work of lost writers and artists from the Holocaust by using a unique, modern writing technique to capture the complex aftermath of World War II. While at first glance *Tree of Codes* by Jonathan Safran Foer seems to be an oddly printed book with few words and many holes, the poetic story actually represents the deeper idea that because of the unpredictability of modern politics and war, people's artistic work and stories could be lost at anytime. In addition, everyone can find a story in the experience of someone else. *Tree of Codes* is a story in and of itself about a man's last day on earth – it follows the Father who sees life as empty and temporary to the point that he is portrayed as not actually present. After he passes on, the story reflects on the mother and narrator's points of views, all in a very descriptive and poetic rhythm. However, *Tree of Codes* is derived from another story. It was created from an erasure exercise of *The Street of Crocodiles* by Bruno Schulz, which is Foer's favorite book. Literally, Foer cut out words written by Schulz to make a new story out of the remaining words, and then published the book with a special visual arts

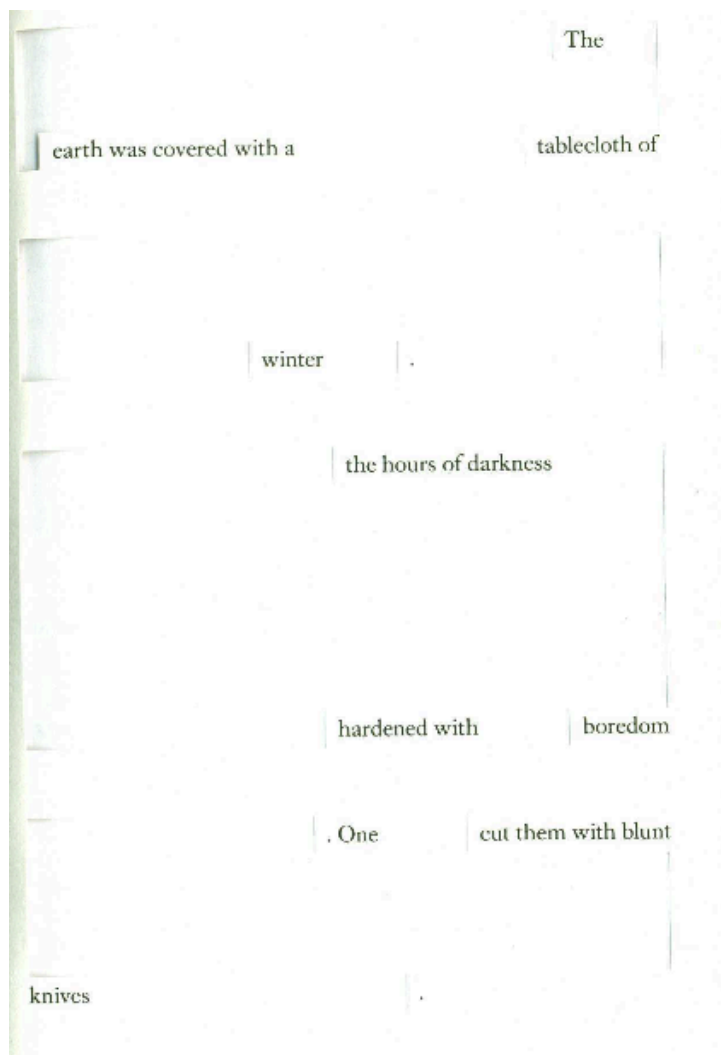
publisher so that when you flip through the book, there are huge holes cut out of all of the pages. While there have been other books that use this erasure method such as *Radi Os* by Ronald Johnson that creates a new poem from the words of *Paradise Lost*, Foer's *Tree of Codes* is significant because he specifically chooses to leave the holes in the book instead of reprinting his new story, which implies that the holes must have a specific meaning.

In an afterward to the text, Foer gives a brief narrative of Schulz. He writes, "When the Germans seized Drohobycha in 1941, Schulz, a Jew, distributed his artwork and papers – which are said to have included the manuscript of a novel, *Messiah*, - to gentle friends for safekeeping. ...not a single item of them has been seen since. All that we have of his fiction are two slim story collections, ... Their shadow – the work lost to history – is, in many ways, the story of the century." In short, Foer says that Schulz is a man of great artistic genius who lost everything, and he wonders what else in history we've lost and which other authors have no legacy at all. While *Tree of Codes* is exhumed from the words of *The Street of Crocodiles*, (the title included), Foer thinks the idea of deriving stories from other places is even broader than his own attempts. In his afterward, he says, "Often, while working on this book, I had the strong sensation that *The Street of Crocodiles* must have, itself, been the product of a similar act of exhumation."¹⁶ By this, Foer means that while his story comes directly from Schulz's, all writers come up with their own stories from the influences of others. Foer's sense of necessity to continue on the stories of others as a result of the terrors of World War II explains why a visual formatting – the holes in the page - must be included. They give tangible sentiments to the reader that could not be otherwise achieved, and it reminds the reader with each page turn that every story comes from somewhere

¹⁶ Foer, Jonathan Safran. *Tree of Codes*. London: Visual Ed., 2011. Print. 139.

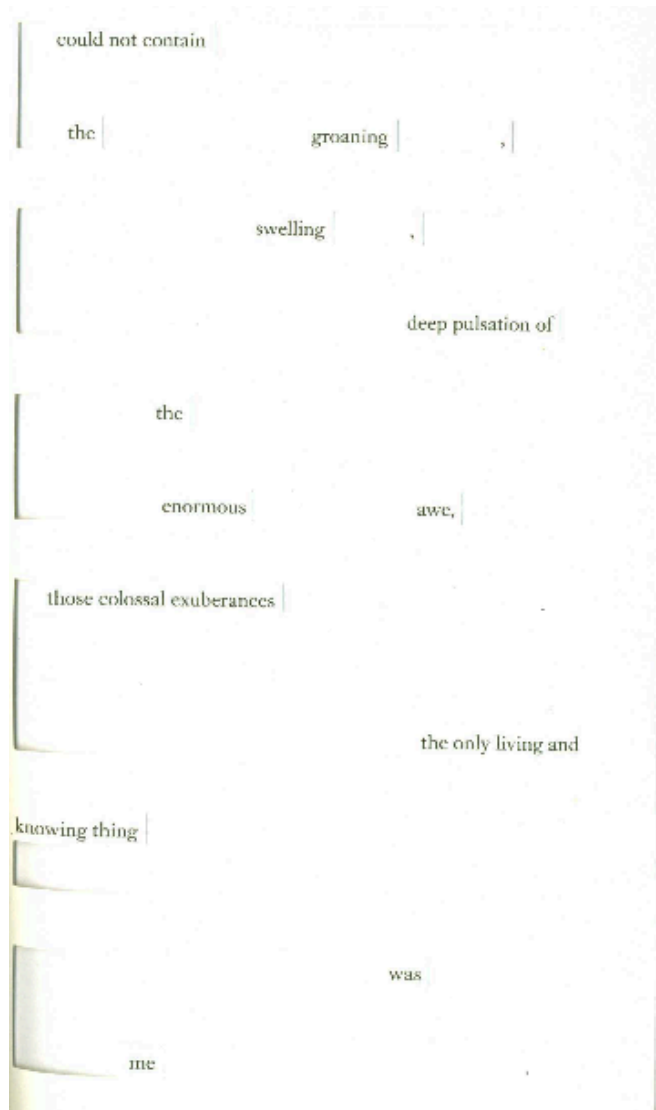
else. All of the artistic choices made in writing *Tree of Codes* reflect the desire to keep alive the stories of others despite what has been lost through contemporary conflicts.

Foer intends to both commemorate Schulz while also adding to the legacy of storytelling, so *Tree of Codes* switches between moments when Foer is searching for words that he wants to use to create his own story and moments where he is looking to preserve the words of Schulz. For example, there are many pages where the words seem so thought out and deliberate that they must be Foer's purposeful creation. One page reads:



The words “covered,” “tablecloth,” “winter,” “darkness,” “hardened,” “boredom,” “blunt,” and “knives,” all have equal weight and contribute to the same mood – there is something

smothering and vicious about the way the character sees the world. It is clear that these words were not just available to Foer, but that he deliberately chose them to create a mood in his own writing. Another place this is seen in the story:



The use of the word “miniscule” right before the explosion of adjectives like “swelling,” “pulsation,” and “colossal,” shows the intentional choice of highlighting words of similar meaning on this page. It is in sentences such as these where it seems like Foer is really in control of the novel he is writing, while he is still aware of the groupings of similar adjectives Schulz has left for him to play with.

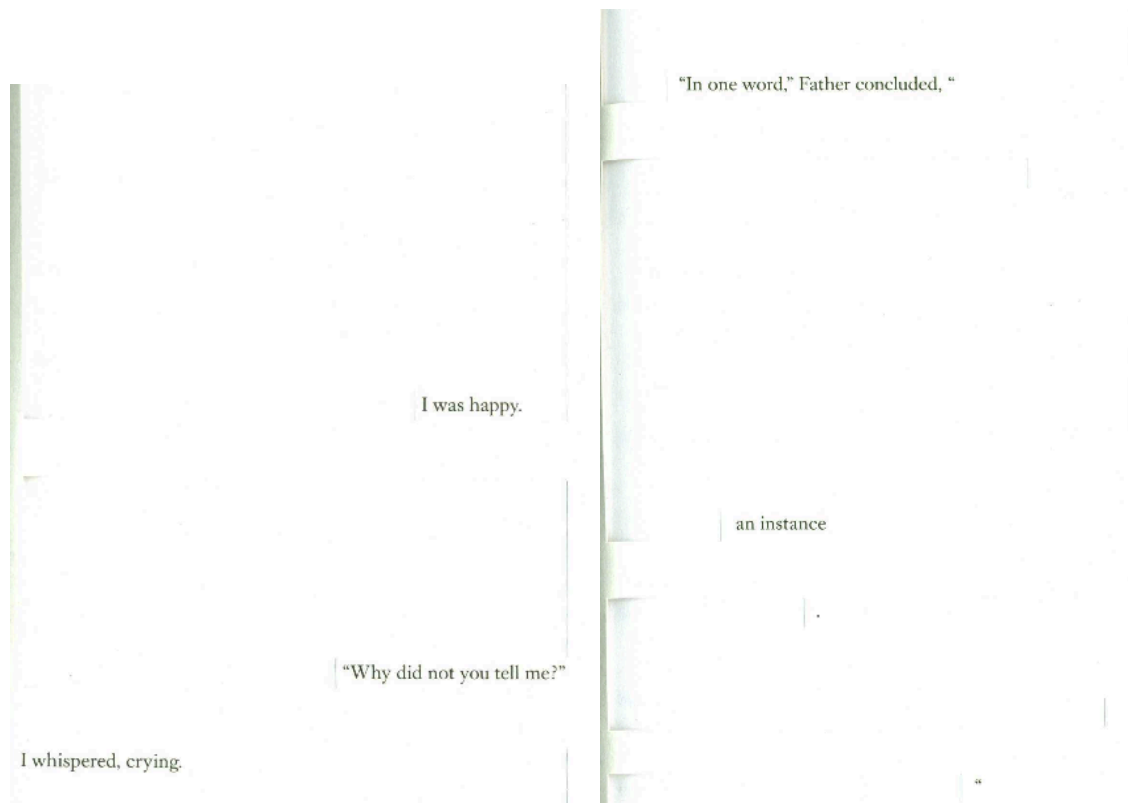
However, this clarity is not always the case. For example, early in the story Foer writes, “He seemed to scatter into fragments, an enormous featherless dignity...”¹⁷ Somehow, “featherless,” does not seem like *le juste mot*, and it feels like Foer was forced to include it because it was the only adjective available to him on the page. In other sentences he uses fragments because they are closer to conveying what he is trying to say than what the full sentence would be. For example, he says, “The farthest ultimate beyond which one could see no farther.”¹⁸ While I understand the meaning of this sentence, it sounds like Foer is greatly confined by the words he has to choose from. Other times, the words might make sense together but punctuation would just not be available to Foer. Although poetic, it sounds awkward when Foer writes, “It seemed he might disintegrate, I grabbed with trembling hands. He became smaller and smaller, wilted into a petal of nothingness” because of the unusual placement of the commas.¹⁹ The inclusion of these imperfect sentences in Foer’s published work suggests that they are purposeful reminders of the preservation of Schulz’s writing. These sentences might have been built into the story despite their imperfections to deliberately remind the reader of the story that preceded it.

While Foer uses the erasure method to commemorate Schulz and create a new story, he also uses it to remind the reader of the fleeting quality of life, in the way Foer must imagine Schulz’s life before the Holocaust. There are two pages in the book that stand out because Foer skips many words to leave a nearly blank page with a simple message in the center:

¹⁷ Foer, *Tree of Codes*, 38.

¹⁸ Foer, *Tree of Codes*, 68.

¹⁹ Foer, *Tree of Codes*, 108.



The placement of the statements “an instance,” and “I am happy,” on pages with the fewest words emphasizes their importance and momentarily slows down the reading of the book. It also allows the reader to reflect back on where this story has come from. Thought of together, the reader thinks of happiness, but as happiness only for an instance, as a transitory moment that could pass at any time.

It is extremely important to consider why Foer chose to print the book with the cutouts instead of retyping his new story after he completed the erasure exercise. The deliberate printing of the book signifies that Foer wants the method remembered with each page turn to convey a deeper meaning than the words on the page can describe. With the cutouts, the story is left with innumerable grammar mistakes, including backwards quotes, sentences beginning with lowercase letters, pronoun disagreements and large gaps between words and their corresponding period or comma. These grammar errors along

with the page holes make the text harder to sit down to read and follow. Foer is extremely well educated and knows grammar rules, so the reader can assume there is a greater intention behind leaving the writing in this format.

As previously stated, the holes serve as a reminder that *Tree of Codes* is part of a greater story, and that all stories come from somewhere else, especially in this modern era where stories do not always have a legacy after times of conflict. The lack of grammar emphasizes that format is not the most important element of a story, and it challenges the reader to search for the meaning and depth of the words themselves. The holes left in the pages also trigger the constant awareness of time. Because the reader can literally see through the pages, it is like he can see into the future – just little snippets of the words that are to come ahead. On the back cover of the book, it reads, “The gaps in-between words and pages – all of the book that isn’t black ink resonates...activates the layers of time and space involved in the handling of a book and its heap of words.” This implies that *Tree of Codes* is more than just a story, and would not be the same if printed with regular font on regular paper. The gaps in the pages add a new realm to the book that reminds the reader of transcending time and space.

This idea of time goes reflects the story’s theme of the dying father, and many lines in the text directly relate the story to the written page. For example, the narrator states that, “Reality is as thin as paper. Only the small section immediately before us is able to endure...”²⁰ This obviously makes the reader think about the page of paper in front of him, and how it is not just thin but actually filled with holes. This gives a message about reality that is greater than could ever be described with words – it allows the reader to have a

²⁰ Foer, *Tree of Codes*, 92-3.

tangible sense of a fragile reality by physically feeling the paper under his fingers. In another part of the story, the narrator says, “When writing these tales about my father, I surrender to the secret hope that they will merge into the rustle of pages and become absorbed there.”²¹ This adds to the idea of how people’s stories are told through word. However, it is important to note that the narrator does not just want the father’s story to be written, but to actually be “absorbed,” into the pages, which once again creates the idea of a greater depth to a story than just thin pages. For a book about endings, it is extremely important that the narrator describes the end by comparing it to punctuation. He says, “One day brought the improbable news of the imminent end. In midsentence as it were, without a period or exclamation mark, the world was to end” (130). This helps to explain why Foer leaves incorrect grammar in his published story - just as we cannot shape our lives and choose where we begin and end events, Foer visually highlights that it is pointless to attempt to have control over grammar in writing. Overall, the erasure-method and die-cut technique that Foer employs in *Tree of Codes* successfully commemorates authors of the past and gives a tangible account of how stories do not have a beginning or ending, but rather always build on each other.

Forty-five years after the end of World War II and the Holocaust came another war that has significant impact on modern literature because of the war’s media portrayal. The Gulf War began in 1990 when Iraq invaded nearby Kuwait, and the UN reacted in opposition. Thirty-four countries joined together to defend Kuwait against Iraq’s actions, with the United States leading the efforts alongside Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom, and

²¹ Foer, *Tree of Codes*, 110.

Egypt.²² This war brought together Middle Eastern and Western countries, and it was the first time the US entered into war in this region of the world.

Although this conflict was called a “war” because of the use of the army, military spending, and international conflict, many critics questioned using the word “war” to describe the Gulf War even before the conflict began. A war is two-sided – it generally involves two committed armies who switch off between offensive and defensive action. However, this is not how the Gulf War functioned. In actuality, the war is most characterized by the US attacking Iraqi troops through aerial attacks, which continued until the Iraqi troops on the ground were killed or fled. The entire conflict lasted for only a few months, and there were virtually no American deaths compared to other wars.²³

One writer in particular – Jean Baudrillard – wrote about this idea in three essays, originally published in the French newspaper *Libération*. He wrote each essay separately, one when the war was only talked about, one during military action, and one after the conflict ended. Respectively, the essays were titled, “The Gulf War will not take place,” “The Gulf War is not really taking place,” and “The Gulf War did not take place.” While he does not deny the actual events of the war, Baudrillard’s writing comments more on the representation of the war to the American people through media. The media had a distinct role in the Gulf War compared to other conflicts that preceded it, because of live footage from the frontlines that were aired on television in the US. Baudrillard points out that the war was unbalanced from the start. The fact that he wrote the first essay before the fighting

²², ²³ “Persian Gulf War.” 2013. *The History Channel website*. Web. 12 Dec. 2013.
<<http://www.history.com/topics/persian-gulf-war>>.

even began shows that he knew the US would automatically win, enforcing that the Gulf War was not a war between two countries.²⁴

Another way that Baudrillard describes the war is by what he calls simulacra. In terms of the war, this is the media that depicts the war in a way that makes it seem like the United States was participating in a regular war, without accurately depicting the war itself. For this reason, some people call the Gulf War a “video game war” because the way the American people watched the events of the war on TV is similar to the way people participate in the violence of video games. The games depict a scene but the scene does not accurately represent reality. Furthermore, people are participating in that action from the comfort of their homes. When Baudrillard says, “the Gulf War did not take place,” he means that it was not a real war, it did not take place as Americans perceived that it did, and people were not involved in the war in the way they thought they were given their access to media coverage. In a way, it was a hoax that Americans thought they won a war. Americans participated in merely the image or depiction of a war based on some other reality.

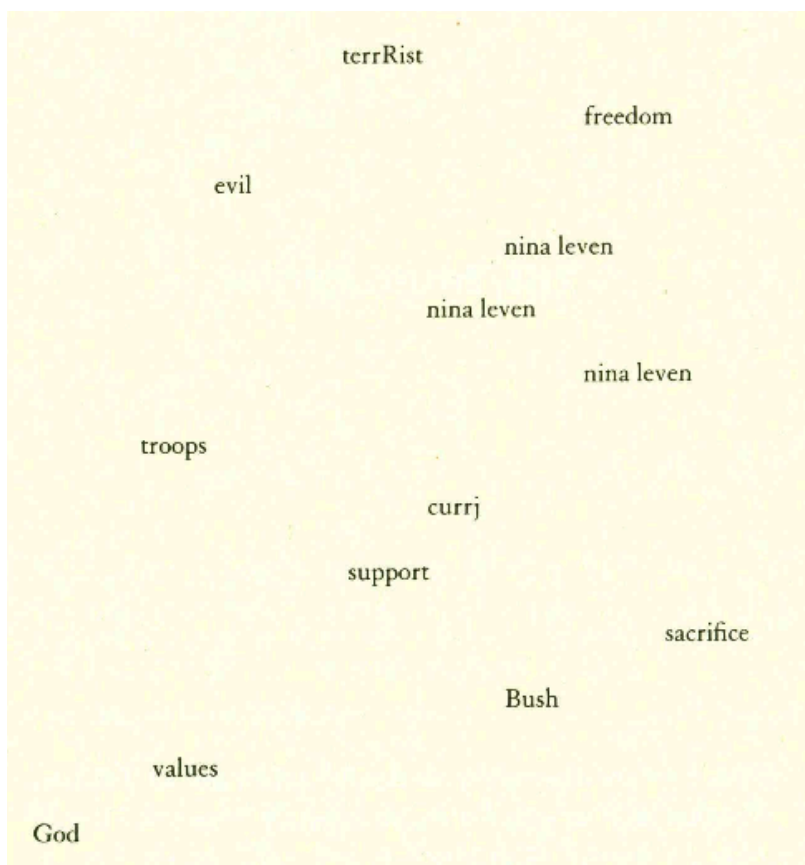
Ten years later, 9/11 occurred. This tragedy on US soil triggered a second Gulf War, more commonly referred to as the war in Iraq, which lasted from 2003-2011. While the major reasons for the conflicts were different in origin and the war in Iraq had a greater on the ground presence, the influence of the media permeated into this second war in the region. More than ever, there was attention placed on the media coverage making its way onto American televisions and online sources, and how accurately they conveyed the events of the war in Iraq.

²⁴ Pipes, Daniel. "Review: The Gulf War Did Not Take Place." *Daniel Pipes Middle East Forum*. N.p., Mar. 1996. Web. 12 Dec. 2013. <<http://www.danielpipes.org/696/the-gulf-war-did-not-take-place>>.

Just as with the complicated ideas of Surrealism and the unspeakable truth of the Holocaust, contemporary writers also struggle with putting into words the multifaceted conflict in Iraq, and moreover representing the clash between the war abroad and the image of the war to US civilians. One writer, Ben Fountain, realizes this difficulty and takes on the challenge in his novel, *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*. The book follows the eponymous character Billy as he returns from Iraq to America for just a two-week tour around the country, before he knows he will return to battle in Iraq. The set-up of the book allows constant comparison between the war in Iraq and the perceptions of the war to the American people who Billy meets throughout the novel. Because these ideas are so complicated, as we have seen in other novels of contemporary writers, describing a character like Billy with words alone is not sufficient for Fountain to fully capture the disparity between Billy's actual experience overseas and how he makes sense of this experience in light of his tour in America.

In *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, Ben Fountain sporadically breaks from the regular text into visual blocks of jumbled words to give the reader insight into the young, uneducated, confused, and war-shaken mind of Billy. The novel takes place over the course of a single day, and it focuses on eight war heroes referred to as the Bravo squad. The Bravos came to fame because of a Fox News clip that showed them in the battle of Al-Ansakar Canal in the Iraq War, and now they are on a two-week tour in the US on behalf of the government to boost morale for the war. On the day the novel takes place, the Bravos are at a special football game in Texas, Billy's home state, where they have been invited to take part in the halftime show.

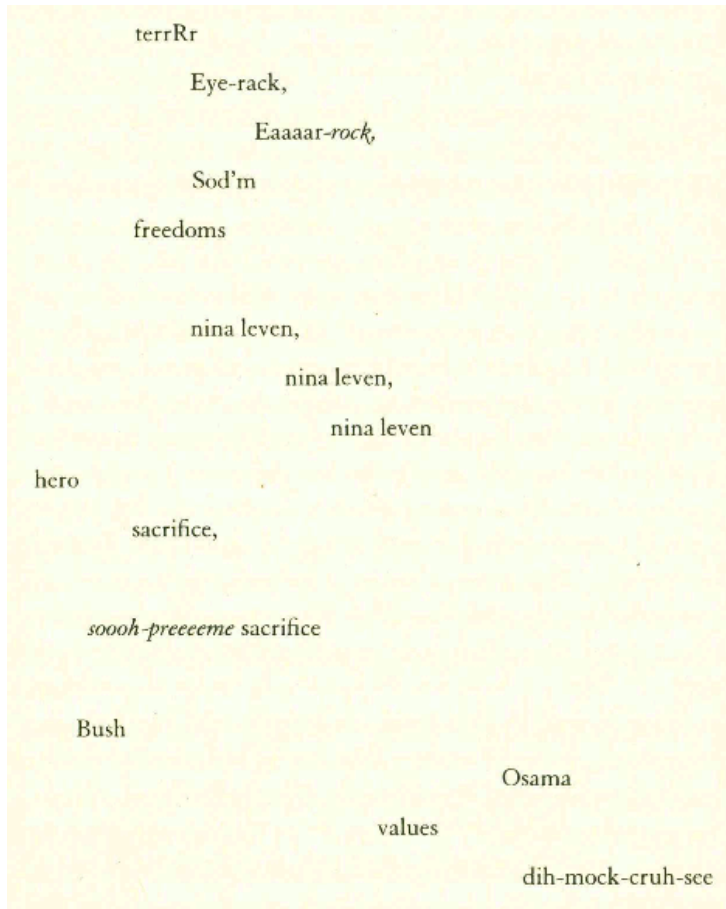
The first time Fountain incorporates the jumbled words is on the very first page, so it is clear that the author felt this was a necessary way to introduce the novel. Billy begins to describe a man who he met in the hotel lobby, who was, “crammed into starched blue jeans and fancy cowboy boots,” and “gesturing with his giant Starbucks...embarked on a rambling speech about war and God and country...” Here the author has set up a situation where Billy is talking to someone unlike himself, who clearly does not understand war firsthand – he epitomizes wealthy Americans who avoid war with his expensive clothing and coffee. The sentence finishes, “...as Billy let go, let the words whirl and tumble around his brain...” followed by words floating around the page:



Printing the words in this manner allow the reader to actually visualize what Billy's thoughts must feel like. He has just been serving in Iraq and is shipped to the US for just

two weeks to travel across the country before returning to active service. It is unimaginable to someone who has not experienced war to think about what this rapid change in culture and lifestyle must feel like. The jumbled words give us a sense of the confusion Billy is going through in trying to make sense of it all. In addition, it is important to note that in this first section of rambling words, all but three are spelled correctly, which is different than later parts.

Two chapters later, the same format of words reappears in a different context. Now at the football game, the Bravos have been announced, and as people at the game realize their presence they swarm the squad with hellos and kind words. Billy describes the experience, which is similar to the experience he has had everywhere else in the country during the two week tour. "*We appreciate*, they say, their voices throbbing like a lover's. Sometimes they come right out and say it, *We love you*. We are so grateful. We cherish and bless. We pray, hope, honor-respect-love-and-revere and they *do...*" Then, Fountain says that, "...these verbal arabesques that spark and snap in Billy's ears..." which leads into the next jumble. This time, the words scattered around the page read:

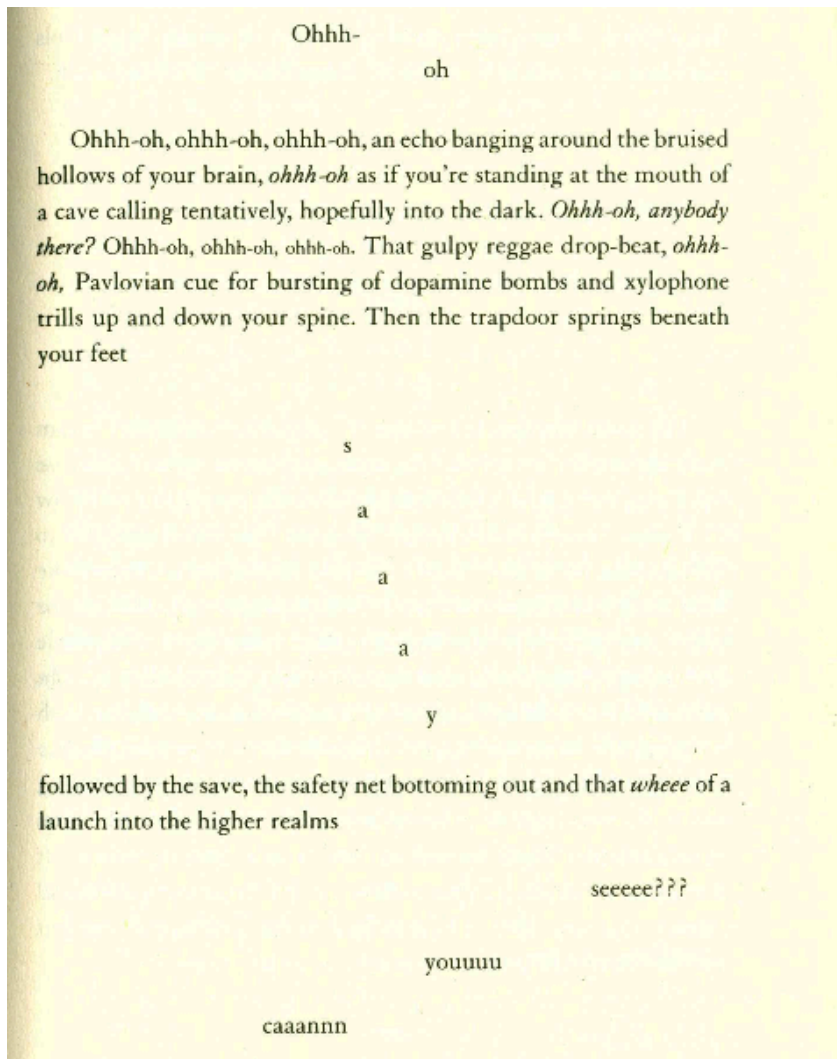


This visual printing has many more misspelled elements than the first, a shift. This is significant because it clarifies to the reader Billy's sense of feeling overwhelmed and confused, both by the sheer number of people and compliments coming his way, as well as why people are complimenting him when people normally do not. Directly following the jumbled section, Fountain writes, "No one spits, no one calls him baby-killer."²⁵ This emphasizes that these encounters with the American public present a contradiction to Billy, because he thinks people should be more affected by the military tasks he is carrying out overseas. Another question this section presents is whether or not the misspellings of words, which reflect pronunciation, are the pronunciation of Billy or of the people saying

²⁵ Fountain, Ben. *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*. New York: Ecco, 2012. Print.

the words to him. For example, he has Iraq written twice but with two different spellings and pronunciations, and Fountain leaves the spelling unfixed. This likely means that the word is being said to him in different ways and he hears it twice, so it is important to remember that not all of the words in Billy's head are his own. Another interesting word is "Sod'm," which represents Saddam Hussein; however the way it is written, it can be pronounced, "Sodom," referring to the sinful biblical city. This could be interpreted that Billy hears something inherently evil about the words associated with war. Lastly, "nina leven" is especially important, because it is the only misspelled word that appears both in the jumble of Billy's thoughts as well as outside of the visual text and in the regular prose. The fact that Billy never actually says September 11th signals that it might be too emotionally difficult for him to say the real name of the event. There seems to be some sort of avoidance in play that reinforces the contradiction to Billy of the reality in America against the reality of war.

Probably the most striking visual-literary element is the printing of the Star Spangled Banner as it is sung, because each syllable of each song lyric is printed in a way that reflects the tune of the song and the emphasis of the singer. In between lines of the song, the narrator reflects on the way Billy hears the words of the song in his head.



It is incredible that just a single sung word, “Oh,” could trigger such a reaction. “Oh” conjures the feeling of a bruised empty brain, being completely alone and feeling uncontrollable sensations, which reflects the larger conflict Billy struggles with in the book. The untraditional format of writing the Star Spangled Banner allows the reader to gain insight into the feelings of Billy that would otherwise be nearly impossible to convey.

In addition to giving us irreplaceable insight into the mind of Billy, the choice to write sections of words in an untraditional format is what gives the novel the ability to capture a long span of time in just one day. While the book also incorporates flashbacks, it

is how the memories play into Billy's present thoughts that create a sense of time. Even though the novel is set in Texas, the reader is still able to feel the huge depth of space that separates Billy's hometown and his location in Iraq. The choice to write out Billy's thoughts in a way that reflect how they sit in his mind creates space and distance in the novel so that the reader has the feeling that Billy both close to and far from home at the same time. In this novel, untraditional word formatting adds depth that would be unattainable otherwise, because it gives great insight into the thoughts of a young soldier experiencing the clash between American traditions and modern warfare, a concept that the average reader cannot understand without an explanation more thorough than words on a page. It also reinforces the problems encountered with the Gulf War and the war in Iraq, because Billy sees first hand how the American people understand the war only as a "video game," which causes Billy to struggle with conflating his two realities.

In the last century, the world we live in has drastically changed. There have been numerous wars, one as deadly and harmful as the next, and modern political theories and philosophical ideas as a result of these military conflicts have become widespread movements. The 20th century did not only mark the beginning of these modern problems and ideas, but a change in literary form. As I have argued, this is because the two are closely related. Authors and artists feel compelled to express the complicated ideas they feel in response to modern politics. While in the past expressing an opinion through the written word was sufficient for authors to demonstrate their views on society, new non-literary elements have been presented by various authors to illuminate the deep conflicts in modern civilization.

To reinforce this conclusion, I have examined three texts from three different time periods that portray the need for non-literary elements to fully capture the author's thoughts. In *Nadja*, André Breton uses the character of Nadja and concrete images to force the reader to question what is a dream and what is reality, which moreover denies the idea of multiple realms of existence. Breton's ideas in *Nadja* are rooted in the confusion from World War I that was also examined by the Dadaism art movement. In *Tree of Codes*, Jonathan Safran Foer uses an erasure method to commemorate the work of Bruno Schulz, an artist lost to the horrors of the Holocaust. Foer's new story not only recognizes the importance of the storytelling tradition but also asks the reader to remember all of the stories that are lost through modern wars such as World War II. In *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*, Ben Fountain takes into account the inconsistencies between the war in Iraq and the impression of the war in the US by showing the psychological process of Billy through visual displays of the words in his head. His novel reminds us not only of the misperception of the war in Iraq but also of the inaccurate media messages of the Gulf War that created something more like a video game than participation from the home front.

Going forward, we can expect literature such as these texts to become much more prominent. While these authors came to use these extra elements because it was the only method that would fully capture their message about our modern society, other authors who face the same struggle will think of these selections, and include similar creative methods into their own writing. Non-literary elements add an engaging and satisfactory element to texts that brings the reader deeper into the story and asks more thought-provoking questions. While no one desires for there to be future wars that might trigger more confusion to be expressed in literature, it is hoped that these contemporary literary

elements will gain popularity and become a distinctive feature of contemporary fiction because of their success in illuminating the essence of each novel.